

Town of Cape May Court House  
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail  
Intersection of U.S. Highway 9 and  
County Road 612  
Cape May Court House  
Cape May County  
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1052

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NJ  
E-CAPMAC,  
3-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### TOWN OF CAPE MAY COURT HOUSE

HABS No. NJ-1052

**Location:** New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, Intersection of U.S. Highway 9 and County Road 612, Cape May Courthouse, Cape May County, New Jersey.

**Significance:** Cape May Court House, settled in the mid-seventeenth-century, is the county seat of Cape May County.

**History:** The neoclassical court house on Route 9, for which the Cape May Court House was named represents a history dating back to the seventeenth century. In 1695, Shamgar Hand purchased the land located inland from what is now Stone Harbor, where the town of Middletown, now Cape May Court House, developed. Almost fifty years later, the growing county required municipal facilities more dependable than local citizens' homes. County officials chose the first Baptist church constructed in the county, built in 1715, for use as a government building until funds were obtained for the first real courthouse, erected in 1774.<sup>1</sup> Shamgar Hand's grandson, Daniel, donated the land for the building, the same year he applied for a license to maintain a "house of entertainment."<sup>2</sup>

During the early 1800s, when Jonathan Hand built his law office across from the courthouse, Middletown established a post office and changed its official name to Cape May Courthouse. As the nearby towns of Goshen and Dennisville grew on profits from shipbuilding, competition arose for the honor of county seat. When Cape May Court House won the election, the town constructed a new building, completed in 1850.<sup>3</sup> The "old" courthouse is flanked by two other significant buildings--the First Methodist Episcopal Church, built between 1854 and 1855 and the ca. 1885 prosecutor's office. Only the facade of the building remains, with its symbolic copper pediment picturing a quill pen, ink pot and open book. The rest of the historic structure was replaced by a modern foundation and awaits funding before completion. Next door is the 1927 court house building, which no longer appears to be in use and the offices of the county clerk, constructed of a complementary brick in 1975. A fire in 1905 destroyed much of the towns early architecture, including, Hand's tavern, Union Hotel, the earlier 1774 courthouse, as well as twenty-two other buildings in the commercial district.<sup>4</sup>

A focal point of the county's municipal complex today, the "old" court house is situated along an otherwise architecturally diverse, commercially developed thoroughfare. Typical modern conveniences, such as McDonald's and MAC machines and their respective parking lots, have infringed upon the town's quiet.

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<sup>1</sup> George F. Boyer and J. Pearson Cunningham, Cape May County Story (Avalon: Avalon Publishing Co., 1975), 80.

<sup>2</sup> William McMahon, South Jersey Towns: History and Legend (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Boyer and Cunningham, 82.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert M. Beitel and Vance C. Enck, Cape May County: A Pictorial History (Norfolk: The Donning Company, 1988), 79.

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Still, Cape May Court House retains a flexible attitude toward change, often incorporating the new into the old. Examples of early twentieth century commercial buildings, such as the Gazette Block dated the year of the fire, and a brick store with an ornamental cornice, line Mechanic Street, which runs perpendicular to Route 9. Across the street, the Cape May County Library continues the town's commitment to the "court house style," complete with well-rusted copper-roofed cupola. Cape May Court House neighborhoods also display a unique blending of styles, as early nineteenth century one-room cottages stand adjacent to Gothic Revival Homes resembling those in Cape May City. Contemporary houses have also been integrated into the residential plan. The backroads of Cape May Court House reveal this tolerance of the past in the midst of contemporary development and change. An engine from the famous Shore Fast Line stands on its abandoned railroad tracks near signs still warning travelers of passing trains. Just down the block construction continues on the town's new elementary school.

Prepared by: Camille Gatza  
HABS Historian  
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- Sources:
- Beitel, Herbert M. and Enck, Vance C. Cape May County: A Pictorial History. Norfolk: The Donning Company, 1988.
- Boyer, George F., and Cunningham, J. Pearson. Cape May County Story. Avalon: Avalon Publishing Co., 1975.
- McMahon, William. South Jersey Towns: History and Legend. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973.
- Sebold, Kimberly, and Sara Amy Leach. Historic Themes and Resources within the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail and the Delaware Bay. Washington D.C.: Department of the Interior, 1991.

Project Information:

This project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of HABS historian Sara Amy Leach, project supervisor. Three historians completed the research during summer 1991: Field supervisor Sarah Allaback (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Alfred Holden (University of Vermont), and Camille Gatza (North Carolina). David Ames (University of Delaware) made the large-format photographs. Historian, Elizabeth Harris May (George Washington University), edited the HABS reports.

# CAPE MAY COURT HOUSE

Scale 400 ft. per inch.

Surv. by H. C. Woolman

